

The Space Race

As World War II drew to a close, the United States and the communist Soviet Union embarked on a new conflict, dubbed the Cold War—a non-military conflict in which each country tried to prove that it had the superior technology and political/economic system. In nowhere was the Cold War more prominent than in humanity’s attempts to make it into space.

On October 4, 1957, the world’s first artificial satellite, named Sputnik, was launched into space by the Soviet Union. This was unexpected by the Americans, who took it as a challenge. A year later the U.S. launched its first satellite, Explorer I, and President Dwight Eisenhower created the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) with a mission "To understand and protect our home planet; to explore the universe and search for life; to inspire the next generation of explorers ... as only NASA can."

In 1959 the Soviets launched Luna 2, the first space probe to hit the moon, and attention in both countries turned to sending a man in space. The U.S. effort to send a man into space was named Project Mercury. Its final test flight took place in March, 1961, but before the U.S. could launch, the Soviet’s launched their Vostok I in April, making Yuri Gagarin, a Soviet cosmonaut, the first person to orbit Earth. A month later Alan Shepherd became the first American in space (though not in orbit) and in a now-famous speech, President John F. Kennedy announced that the U.S. would put a man on the moon by the end of the decade. In the following year John

Glenn became the first American to orbit Earth, and as that year drew to a close, NASA’s lunar landing program, Project Apollo, had officially begun.

Project Apollo required massive budget increases, 34,000 NASA employees and 375,000 employees of industrial and university contractors. The Soviets were involved in a similar effort. Both programs moved ahead slowly, and experienced setbacks. But in December of 1968, the first manned space mission to orbit the moon Apollo 8, was launched from Cape Canaveral, Florida. Seven months later, in Apollo 11, Neil Armstrong became the first man to walk on the moon.

Armstrong setting foot on the moon was a bit like a runner crossing the finish line: the “space race” was over; the U.S. had won. But ironically, what had been a virtual battleground between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was also ultimately a way for the cold war to wind down, and for both countries to recognize their common humanity. In 1975, 18 years after the launch of Sputnik, the U.S. and the Soviets conducted the joint Apollo-Soyuz mission. Three U.S. astronauts travelled into space on an Apollo spacecraft that docked in orbit with a Soviet-made Soyuz vehicle, and the commanders of the two crafts officially greeted each other with a “handshake in space.”

YOUR ASSIGNMENT:

On a separate piece of paper, explain how the Soviet Union’s space program influenced the U.S. presidents of that time.

